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ABSTRACT

A personal transformation group therapy program was designed to help Saudi women function more effectively in their daily lives. The major cognitive idea of these groups was to enable women to better understand their thinking patterns so that they could learn techniques to change. Personal transformation group topics included: Self-Esteem; Awareness and Conscious Living; Emotional Intelligence; Insight; and Honoring the Self. The groups were conducted at a Women's Center along with courses to teach them cooking; drawing; computer skills; foreign languages; and body fitness. Since receiving individual therapy from a mental health provider continues to be a stigma in the Arab culture a significant effort was made to present these groups as self-development. The success of these groups will continue to empower women to assume an increasingly active role in the social and economic development of their society and will continue to be the focus of international psychology. (JDM)

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THERAPY WITH WOMEN IN MEXICO, SAUDI ARABIA, THAILAND, AND CAMBODIA

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION: A GROUP THERAPY PROGRAM FOR SAUDI WOMEN

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Personal Transformation: A Group Therapy Program for Saudi Women

Every society's socialization patterns are unique and confront women with a different set of barriers and discriminations with respect to work and education. However, there are some national differences. In the Arab world, as in the West, stereotypical views held by society of the female's role influence Arab women's perceptions of themselves in relation to others and to their environment. In Saudi Arabia, a very conservative society, the restrictions on women's roles are particularly strong. There are several factors that impede Saudi females from becoming fully productive in their society. These may be divided into two categories: external barriers that result from the traditional and cultural heritage imposed on females by society which is supported by Islamic law and reflected in civil law, and internal barriers which have been assimilated and internalized by women through the socialization process.

Saudi Arabia: A Fast Developing Nation

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a large Middle-Eastern nation of 865 thousand square miles that occupies four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula. Its size is comparable to the size of the United States east of the Mississippi river. Much of the country's area is covered by scrub desert, not unlike that of the American southwest. Saudi Arabia's geography is surprisingly varied. Rugged mountain ranges, forests, grasslands, and vast seas of sand all characterize the landscapes.

Weather conditions can vary dramatically from one region of Saudi Arabia to the next. The expected very hot and very dry conditions occur in the vast deserts, yet the highlands are relatively cool and moist.

The People:

Most native Saudi Arabians are descended from the land's indigenous Arab tribes. Saudi Arabia's population is estimated at approximately 15 million of which 66% are rural and 34% urban. Nearly all the people in Saudi Arabia are Arab Muslims. The Islamic religion dominates every aspect of Saudi life. One of the major features of Saudi society, which has widespread implications for all facets of social interaction, is that women are segregated from men for most social activities.

Political System:

The national government of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the laws of Islam. The king holds executive and legislative power and is assisted by an appointed council of Ministers. The royal family consists of several thousand persons and is the most important political group of Muslim leaders. To stay in power, the king must have the support of the royal family, the powerful religious leaders (the 'Ulama), and local tribe

leaders. All Saudi citizens have the right of direct petition to the monarch or the regional governors, as well as other officials. These petitions are most often received during regular public audiences.

Natural Resources:

Much of the country consists of vast deserts where few people live and little or nothing grows, but beneath the sand and rock of Saudi Arabia lie some of the largest oil deposits in the world. It is one of the world's leading producers of petroleum and ranked by some as the third largest producer of oil in the world. Saudi Arabia's reserve of oil is estimated as over one-fourth of the world's reserve. The increase of revenues from oil has had profound effects on the country. Saudi Arabia has undergone a dynamic process of industrialization and urbanization with major consequences to its social structure. These vast financial resources have opened the way to development programs in educational, social, economic, and administrative areas.

Economy:

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has witnessed a great surge in economic development during the last thirty years. This has resulted in significant changes in the web of the social and economic life in the country. A total of six five-year plans (1970-2000) have been successfully executed. They resulted in the establishment of a vastly improved economic infrastructure in the sectors of communications, telecommunications, agriculture, industry, mining, construction, housing, education and manpower, health, and community welfare. This has laid the basis for the full economic development of the nation

Heritage and Tradition:

Saudi Arabia was the first place in which Islam took root and became the foundation of the Arabic way of life. The prophet Mohammad taught the values of the new religion to the people which were written in what is known as the Hadith. After his death, the texts of the Koran and the Hadith were standardized and became the basis for the spreading of Islam throughout the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, and Asia. The study of these texts became formalized and was carried on in mosques and madrassahs (schools). These schools were the basis of Muslim higher education in Saudi Arabia until the present century.

The protection of fundamental beliefs and the development of a prosperous society are the unique characteristics of Saudi Arabian heritage. The family in Saudi Arabia is a part of society, which represents its customs and habits. The family is the most important system in Saudi society. It has a very strong structure, which embodies the fundamental culture and principles of Islâm.

Of interest to this presentation is the impact of the Islamic heritage and traditions on the status of women in Saudi Arabian society. The Koran contains specific references to the superiority of men over women that exist because "Allah so created it". At the same time, according to the Koran percepts, men and women are equal in their origin and in their rights. Women are considered independent economic personalities and may manage their possessions with no constraints put upon their financial activities. A woman is not required to contribute financially to the support of her household; yet by Islamic law (Shari'a), a woman's inheritance is only one half as large as a man's.

Value Orientation of Saudi Society:

The Saudi society, as an Arab society that is in the process of developing, has a clear and well-defined system of values and customs. These values guide, direct, and regulate the behavior and the interpersonal and inter group relationships within the society. Researchers in the Arab world have investigated the impact of modernization on members of a traditional society. They maintained that the process of modernization has resulted in a greater sense of individuality among members of Arab society. Compulsory education has accelerated the process of modernization.

Barriers to Development of Saudi Females:

There are several factors that impede females from becoming fully productive in an Arab society. These may be divided into two categories: external barriers that result from the traditional and cultural heritage imposed on females by society, and internal barriers which have been assimilated and internalized by females through the socialization process. Though it is difficult to separate one set of barriers from the other, an overview of some of the most salient ones will be presented.

The central barrier to development, which shapes and fuels the rest, is the stereotype of women, which permeates most Arab and even some Western societies. The image of the female stereotype held by society at large and by the women themselves tend to reinforce the traditional child-rearing practices adopted by parents. In general, women are perceived as "emotional, passive, nurturing, weak, dependent, decorative, non-assertive, and incompetent except in narrowly defined domestic chores".

Women's stereotypical views of themselves constitute an internal barrier that hinders change. Typically, self-assessment is the process by which people examine the courses they have studied, activities they have enjoyed, and jobs they have held to discover more about themselves. However, sex-role stereotyping creates a major problem in self-assessment for women who usually tend to downplay their talents and skills because it is considered unfeminine to be competent. So even in the West, when society affirms the woman's right to free choice, the exercise of such choice continues to bring her into conflict with her notions of femininity.

In Saudi Arabia, while the characteristics attributed to women are not as socially valued as those allotted to men, women who confirm to their stereotype have been traditionally rewarded by being given considerable social value. As a result, this view has acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy, which maintained women's traditional role in society and slowed the pace of their development compared to other changes in society.

There are also external barriers for the development of Saudi women exercised directly or indirectly by society at large. Several research studies on women in Saudi Arabia, concluded that despite the notable shift in the family structure—the extended family giving way to the nuclear family, polygamous marriages diminishing, and the rising number of educated women—there have been no important changes in the traditional roles of men and women. This rapid development in the position of women in Saudi Arabia has been inhibited by several factors:

(1) Social norms in general constitute a resistance to change in women's position.

(2) The limitation in the quantity and quality of education for women acts as a deterrent to their participation in the labor force. Budget appropriations for the education of females constitute only 18% of those for the education of males.

(3) Despite the tremendous need in Saudi Arabia for labor, women are still excluded from full participation in the labor market. There are more than half a million girls who are qualified to work in the Saudi educational system.

(4) Employment of women is still restricted to traditionally female jobs, such as education, social welfare, and health services.

(5) The lack of economic incentive to work outside the home forms an important factor in limiting economic independence and development of women. In spite of all the changes that have taken place in the social, economic, and educational domain, women are still locked into their traditional roles by the limitations of job opportunities on the one hand and considerations of traditional norms on the other.

While Saudi Arabia is gradually easing off many external barriers due to the ever-growing ebb of globalization, Saudi women themselves are increasingly exposed to Western influences through the proliferation of satellite media and explosion of information technologies. It is within these contextual influences that I have contributed as a practitioner to the empowerment of some Saudi women and facilitated their assumption of a more active role within their society.

Personal Transformation Group Therapy

Over the past four years, I have conducted personal transformation group therapy programs, which aimed at enabling Saudi women to function more effectively in their daily lives. The concept of empowerment – a sense of self – that women can do and be what they want to do and be was the goal of these transformational group therapy programs. These groups focused on a variety of themes that combined various techniques to address Saudi women's issues and provide group support. Each group aimed at achieving a number of objectives that focused on promoting self-awareness through self- introspection. The major cognitive thrust of these groups enables the women to better understand their thinking patterns so that they learn techniques to change the way they think (and thus feel). The behavioral patterns that the women have learned often stem from the sexist nature of the Saudi culture; the personal transformation groups ask them to evaluate and change behaviors and to recognize the various positive and negative reinforcements the old and new behaviors elicit from others. This combination of cognitive and behavioral awareness leads to positive change for the group members. The facilitator's process comments directed at behavioral changes that emerge as the group progresses are helpful in reinforcing positive behaviors. The personal transformation group topics included Self Esteem, Awareness and Conscious Living, Emotional Intelligence, Insight, Honoring the Self, etc.

Setting:

The groups were conducted at a Women's center in Alkhobar located in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The Center provided women with a variety of courses to teach them cooking, drawing, computer, foreign languages, and body fitness. These courses were given by native English speakers, primarily Western women who were expatriates living in the country with their husbands. The personal transformation group therapy programs were conducted in the Arabic language. The nature of the programs, the format of delivery (group discussion), as well as the content of the programs was a new phenomenon that was unfamiliar at that time to most of the Saudi women who participated in the programs.

Group size and Composition:

The size of each group ranged between 8-12 women. These women came from rather homogenous backgrounds with regard to socio-economic level as well as age group. They were either homemakers whose lives revolved primarily around raising children, managing households, and attending to husband's needs, or single women who spent most of their energies in the realm of social gatherings. Approximately 20% of these women managed their own businesses directly if the nature of the business was female related such as in health and education-related fields, or indirectly through their male counterparts or appointed male business managers if the nature of the business entailed dealing directly with the public.

Referral:

Receiving individual therapy from a mental health provider continues to be a stigma in the Arab culture and more so in a conservative culture such as Saudi Arabia. Individuals who receive these services in response to dire mental health needs do so with extreme secrecy and caution lest they are identified by a closely-knit family as "crazy". Therefore, the practitioner took extra care in introducing these programs to the female public. Although they appeared initially to be less difficult to promote compared to individual therapy services due to its perceived sense of safety, it clearly turned out to be equally challenging. Most of the women firmly believed that sharing their life stories and disclosing their long-hidden secrets is a taboo that is interwoven tightly within the fabric of the Saudi society.

Because this practitioner is quite familiar with the delicate intricacies of the Saudi society as well as very knowledgeable about its social taboos and sensitivities, a significant effort was expended on presenting these groups to the female public as groups that aim at self-development. Since the self-improvement movement has gained wind in the Saudi culture aided primarily by the satellite dishes springing out in every home and neighborhood across the kingdom, the Saudi female's receptivity to what is perceived as self-development groups was readily available with one additional obstacle. Most of the women who ventured and signed up for these groups were subjected to considerable amount of pressure by their female and male counterparts since they have broken ranks with a strongly imbedded consensus within the Saudi fabric with regard to "keeping your stories to yourself" and sharing with others only those stories that are related to household issues as well as other safe topics such as fashion and travel. During the group sessions, these women had to work through varying degrees of negative feelings projected by significant others in their lives and overcome the resultant self-doubt and consequent hesitation to complete the course of the group work. Therefore, as may be seen from the above, those women who finally ended up joining the groups and successfully sustaining their regular attendance throughout the group life were characterized by extraordinary courage. Their strong need to distance themselves from the generally accepted social norms and assume the role of the Avant-guards in their traditional society helped create a nucleus that started to germinate slowly but surely up to the present time.

Techniques:

The 6-week building block programs focused less on the individual problems than on solutions. At each session the therapist introduced the topic followed by a discussion. Thinking about the concepts in depth and examining related problems tended to broaden their vision and increase their choices. Addressing the four areas of holistic health (spiritual, environment, emotional, physical) throughout these programs clarified what matters most for these women and assisted them in changing some of the behaviors that may not have been conducive to their well being. Furthermore, gradual challenging of some of their belief systems by thinking through its genesis and evaluating the

reinforcement apparatus that has been ingrained in their psyche helped create enough dissonance in their thinking which in turn improved the possibility of behavior change. Homework assignments in the form of reading, emotional inventories and goal setting were vital to the process. Defining what they wanted, setting goals and breaking those goals into "baby steps" were all part of the empowerment process.
The personal transformation groups sought to enhance several areas in a women's life that are unique to Saudi women's experiences. Changes in thinking are accomplished through the examination of irrational beliefs and self-talk. Irrational beliefs are mistaken ideas that operate either consciously or unconsciously. They affect feelings, perceptions and behavior. "I must be loved and approved by everyone. I should be perfect. I need someone stronger or greater than myself to rely on. Avoidance is easier than facing life's difficulties. These are all common messages absorbed into the female psyche contributing to low self-esteem.

Negative self-talk also contributes to low self-regard. By becoming aware of what women say to themselves, stopping the negative messages and substituting more positive or realistic assertions, they can enhance their chances of success. " It's taking self-talk from the self-defeating state: " I can't do this, it's going to be a terrible day; to a more positive state; " Today is going to be a challenge, but I'm up for it. The concept that life is a growth process is a recurrent theme in these life-enhancing groups. " Picture yourself in a boat adrift. The programs and process will put a sail on that boat. You still have the water and you still have the waves, but now you have some control instead if being vulnerable to what they do to you. When you have a sail you can take control, you can get where you want to be."

Another area that these groups address is the interpersonal relationship domain. Women, tend to base their lives on their relationships. It is our greatest strength and our greatest weakness. We tend to judge ourselves based on the success or health of these relationships, becoming demoralized when they are not working. These groups give the women a chance to step back and look at their interpersonal lives. It also gives them a safe place to practice expressing their feelings and experimenting with some steps to solve their problems if they so wished.

Support Group

The support group aspect is vital to the program's effectiveness. Since the groups deal specifically with women's issues and those issues are common to all age groups, support groups assure women that they are not alone. Several members of the group meet regularly for continued support and encouragement. Some of them go over the course material one more time and increase their understanding of the learning that has already taken place. This time they approach it with a different sense of self that is often more independent, mature, and risk-taking. Some others assign a facilitator who has played typically a supportive role during the original group experience. The purpose is to provide a supportive environment where group members can follow-up on some of the issues that have been raised during the formal group experience. These groups share

their findings in a regularly scheduled follow-up meeting after several months of the formal termination of the group experience. They report to the practitioner new discoveries about one or more group members who was a late bloomer or update her on some long-standing issue that has not fully resolved itself during the life of the group.

Electronic mail is another means where group members make use of the practitioner's skill and knowledge to provide support to each other. An internet-savvy member is assigned the task of keeping in regular touch with the practitioner to elicit assistance with regard to impending dilemmas and issues that the group members were unable to resolve. At times, the e-mail sent is in the form of several questions sent by different group members regarding their personal lives that they needed to be addressed. This has served to encourage other women to join these personal transformation groups since they saw the advantage of a regular access via email to a practitioner living overseas as an added bonus.

Follow-Up:

Most of the women who have participated in the personal transformation group therapy programs continued to exhibit a strong interest in new and upcoming groups and topics. They developed a life-long learning interest in reading self-improvement books, attending self-development programs, and interacting with people of similar interest. They became more assertive in their personal lives as well as more independent in their thinking. Some of the women got out of abusive relationships and others got involved in new relationships. They also became increasingly productive in their professional lives. This was evident in their opening up new businesses, getting more involved in already existing businesses, and closing businesses that were draining their finances. They became more proactive and less reactive to the limitations and restrictions imposed on them by their conservative environment. This was facilitated by their newly acquired communication skills where they were able to confront others without appearing aggressive, influence others without being submissive as well as change others by changing themselves.

Future Outlook:

These personal transformation group therapy programs are gaining increasing popularity across the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Many requests are being made to offer these programs in different regions of the kingdom. This will be the focus of future training programs in the coming years. Promoting awareness and facilitating change thus enabling Saudi women to function more effectively in their daily lives has been the mission of this practitioner for the past four years. Empowering women to assume an increasingly active role in the social and economic development of their society will continue to be the focus of international psychology across the globe.

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